XXVI

NAVAL UNIFORMS

SUPPOSED SURVIVALS—PETTICOATS AND WIDE BREECHES

If we had headed this chapter "survivals in naval dress," we should have been in the historic predicament of the writer who took as his topic the snakes of Iceland, and afterwards had to own that there were none. It would be better, however, if we were to say that there are no survivals of a strictly naval kind, as then we should be nearer the truth. There are, of course, in the uniform of both officers and men, plenty of survivals from civilian costume, such as we have spent much time in describing. Though the crews of the galleys, which are the boats reserved for the captain’s use, had, in the case of the smart ships, long been dressed in a uniform manner, the actual uniforms of the Navy only date from a little before the year 1767.

The colours, blue and white, so tradition says, were due to an inspiration which George II received, while the subject was under discussion, on seeing the Duchess of Bedford riding in a new habit which was of blue faced with white.

There are two points in the dress of the ordinary
sailor which are commonly supposed to be interesting survivals, and indeed they appear on the surface to have all the makings of such. It has been thought that the black silk handkerchief which a sailor wears round his neck was first put on as mourning for the death of Nelson. The other matter is the blue jean collar which covers the similar-shaped one which is made of the same material as the sailor's jumper. This would no doubt have protected its fellow from the grease of the pigtail which sailors wore once; but Commander Robinson, who has gone into the question, says that pigtailed were discarded before the blue jean collar came into existence, and at the same time tells us that black silk handkerchiefs were adopted previous to the time of Nelson. It is not perhaps very widely known that sailors at one time wore a kind of kilt or petticoat, and this no longer ago than the year 1779.

Some thirty or forty years earlier there were in vogue loose slops like the petticoat breeches of the reign of Charles II, and the collar of the coat, which was open at the neck, turned back on to the shoulders.

The trousers, however, that are now adopted are tight round the body and thighs, but remain very loose round the legs, and are therefore somewhat curious. The method of buttoning is one which they share with the gentlemen of George II's time, the old-fashioned labourer, and, we believe, the bishop.